SELF-IMAGE, SELF-CONCEPT, AND SELF-IDENTITY REVISITED

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Observation, research, experimentation, and verification are the foundational processes giving rise to principles. Principles imply fundamental truths upon which rest knowledge, learning, and teaching. Knowledge and principles are memorialized by and disseminated through words. The denotative word meanings must be agreed upon in order that principles and knowledge can be formally written and spoken. In this way, the structure of scientific information can be built. Three significant psychological terms failing to meet these criteria are self-image, self-concept, and self-identity. Their significance comes from being foundational stones in the structure of one's self-esteem. To illustrate some of the confusion related to them, randomly selected definitions from the psychological literature are presented for the sake of comparison. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to reach a *better* understanding of these three terms. What will not be discussed here are any literature theories, like Erikson's eight identity stages or Cooley's social interaction *"Looking-glass self."*[1] (*J Natl Med Assoc.* 2003;95:383-386.)

TERMINOLOGY CONFUSION

Self-image has been defined as the "total subjective perception of oneself, including an image of one's body and impressions of one's personality, capabilities, and so on (another term for self-concept)."[2] Several other psychologists have said that one's self-image is one's mental picture, one's physical appearance, and the integration of one's experiences, desires, and feelings. So, which of these is on target? In order to answer this question, one approach to finding a "common ground" understanding of self-image is to step back into its original 13th century English denotative meaning. The word *"image,"* probably from the same source as *"imitate"*(*"to make a copy of"*), was defined both as a *"likeness of something"* and *"to picture to oneself."*[3] When the *"mental"* part was added, the 16th century definition of *"picture"* included a *"visualized conception"* and a figurative *"graphical description."* All of these parts shaped a definition of *"self-image"* as a rough pictorial representation of measurable things.

When one has a mental picture of one's own measurable quantities, one sees: (1) unchanging genetic attributes present at birth (e.g. the shape of certain body parts, like *"slant"* or *"round"* eyes); (2) genetic attributes present at birth that do change (e.g. body proportions, like height); and (3) chosen acquired material things (e.g. money, possessions, jewelry) for the enhancement of one's physical body self-image, of one's public persona, and of

one's measurable *"work products."*

Self-concept has been defined as: *"one's self-identity, a schema consisting of an organized collection of beliefs and feelings about oneself"*[4]; as *"one's sense of 'me'* identity,[5] as *"I"*[6]; and as "a cognitive appraisal of our physical, social, and academic competence."[7] So, is one's self-concept one's self-image? One's self-identity? The *"Me"*? The *"I"*? Or a self- appraisal?

During the European Middle Ages, the word *"concept"* referred to *"the act of conceiving."* The sense of the mental processes converting apprehended impressions into an abstract thought was first recorded in 1380. Abstract (*"to draw away from the physical"*) thoughts represent beings, forms, and qualities of reality, which can only be described. The reason is that, unlike mental images, they have no definite boundaries, allow for no mental pictures, and cannot be measured. This makes concepts *"short hand"* symbols for imageless *"long hand"* thoughts. These thoughts may be about one quality, form, being, principle, or a piece of any reality. Or, these thoughts may refer to a summary of a large number of similar, yet non-identical observations of basic characteristics. An example of a symbolized characteristic quality in an individual is cheerfulness. When self-qualities like cheerfulness represent a general pattern of emotional responsiveness, it reflects a trait of an individual's temperament.

Self-identity, a complex multidimensional concept with several components, has been defined as: *"Who am I?" "An integrated image of himself or herself as a unique person, which often includes ethnic identity"*[6]; and *"What one is"* as distinguished from other persons, what one knows and believes, what one holds dear and reveres, and what meaning one's existence has.[8] So, is a self-identity one's values? Beliefs? Image? Or who one is? Unfortunately, the etymology of *"identity"* deals only with the nature of the self and not one's experiences, which lead to certain behaviors. An *"experience"* is what happens to a person or what that person lives through. Nevertheless, the 16th century word *"identity"* (*"sameness", "oneness"*) originally referred to a set of definitive characteristics that made a person a *"natural self"*—a *"real self"* preserved over time. If we pause to think about that part of us which has not changed since as far back as we can remember, we will realize that this *"natural self"* has acted and reacted, is acting and reacting, and is likely to continue acting and reacting until death (at least) in a typical way to certain experiences. In other words, the stableness of this innate or *"natural self"* creates a birth to death *"sameness"* pattern of experiences or ways of dealing with life.

By contrast, the acquired *"environmental self"* has continually changed since birth as a result of mental and physical growth, of experiences in one's immediate environment, and of experiences associated with society at large. Despite the framework of a given experience having hazy boundaries, within that framework are qualities (concepts) and quantities (concretes)—some of which are characteristics and features containing the power to cause change. Every experience has an effect on oneself and/or others, which may or may not be noticed by the individual. If the person is aware of the effect, a value judgment probably is placed on the interpretation he/she makes about the experience. The 14th century word *"interpret"* originally meant *"to explain the meaning of"* by using the who, which, what, when, where, why, and how format. It presently is used in the sense of *"give meaning to"*—as in denotative definitions, connotative definitions, and perhaps most commonly, a *"translation"* of the thing into everyday terminology. An example of the latter is changing a dream or a riddle into a more understandable language.

DEFINING FOUNDATIONAL TERMS

In bringing all of this together, the key point for practical application is that by staying with

the original denotative meanings of *"image," "concept,"* and *"identity,"* we have a *"common ground"* for building a structure related to self-image, self-concept, and self-identity. From the foregoing, it appears that self-image pertains to (measurable) concretes about what one does (e.g. achieving work products, like sports records), measurable aspects of how one appears (e.g. one's body proportions) and material things one has. One example of how a poor self-image can result is a youth's own degrading of his/her personal physical appearance features (i.e. *"Body Image"*) to the point of feeling inferior.

A good self-image can be built, for example, if the youth's character routinely leads him/her to convert measurable setbacks into measurable accomplishments—*"turning a lemon into lemonade."* By so doing, the youth builds self-confidence in one area of great importance to that youth. Is it not true that people with self-confidence gain it from doing only a very few significant things really well?

Self-concepts are qualities present in oneself. One assesses these qualities through estimates rather than by measurement. Those qualities may concern what one does (e.g. having a disposition for compassion and consideration) and/or may concern non-measurable aspects of how one appears (e.g. pretty, handsome). The assessments placed on these qualities may be significantly influenced by outsiders in one's immediate environment and/or by society at large. For black Americans afflicted with enslaved minds, examples include internalizing the stereotypes of inferiority presented by whites, or taking the position of one's ghetto peer group's decision that being *"academic"* is not *"cool."*

Equally destructive to one's self-concept is the lowering of one's realistic success aspirations for such unjustifiable excuses as being assigned by society at large to the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Failing to reach one's potential is likely to adversely affect one's entire self-image/concept/identity complex. Eventually, most will forever regret not having pursued their dream, and that greatly contributes to low self-esteem. However, because of the collectivism orientation of ghetto blacks, self-concepts are said to be of lesser importance in social interactions when compared to individualist.[9, 10]

Self-identity is the result of a series of involved steps over a long period of time. Step I is an interweave of one's fixed human's nature and one's on-going acquired nature. Step II is selecting aspects out of Step I, interpreting one's experiences, and *"feeling"* one's interactions with people in building a system of values. A system of values consists of one's most cherished immaterial concepts of worth and most prized material aspirations of value. Both categories are extremely influential in determining one's decisions on life-shaping issues. Step III is prioritizing Step II values into a philosophy of life, with the archetype being its core—its top value. Step IV is molding one's identity character traits out of one's philosophy of life. Step V, under the strong influence of monitored feedback from interactions with the outside world, is designing one's personality out of one's character. Step VI is producing work product offsprings from one's character and personality.

HOW THE SELF-IMAGE/CONCEPT/ IDENTITY COMPLEX INTERACT

The first of two contrasting examples of how the self-image/concept/identity complex interact is the *"street people"* of the black ghetto. For them, *"respect"* is at the heart of their street code 11. So meaningful is *"disrespect"* that the *"baddest dudes on the streets"* are willing to risk death over the principle of *"respect."* In other words, *"respect"* represents the top value within their philosophy of life. Built around a *respect*-oriented philosophy of life is their character. One of the *"bad"* character traits they use to gain *"respect"* is the taking of other's possessions. The more expensive jackets, sneakers, and gold jewelry they acquire by whatever means, the higher their self-image.

Reinforcement *"props"* for their self-image and self-identity are *"the look," "the walk,"* and *"the talk."* These three "personality" pieces, as well as their bad character traits, the dishonorable acquiring of things of value, and the displaying of *"manhood"* by exerting violent or abusive power over others are all parts of their work products. The degree to which they are successful is directly proportional to the degree of their value based self-esteem.

An example of a worth-based self-esteem can be seen by looking at how self-identity, self-concept, and self-image are cultivated and nourished in the black church. Whereas the Catholic church is a single, monolithic organization, the black church is an aggregate of separate denominations (e.g. Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal). Most are evangelical (i.e. accepting the Bible as the word of God and emphasizing salvation in the next life).[12, 13] Essential beliefs in forming one's self-meaning are a direct relationship with God[13] and fellowship.[14, 15] A benefit of having a God connection to one's being is the provision of answers to such self-meaning questions as: *"Who Am I?"* and *"What is my purpose in life?"* The effect is a sense of security and *"groundedness"*—both operating at the heart of self-esteem.

The purpose of the minister's sermons is to give further insight into one's being, one's own life's purpose, and one's position in life. These three, help one locate oneself (even in the middle of environmental chaos and personal mental conflicts); aid self-healing[16]; promote the acceptance of one's *"trials and tribulations"* as a test from God[14, 11]; open doors to personal clarity; and add supports to one's self-meaning. Out of this self-meaning comes the character traits which serve as the structure for their self-identity.

Another feature common to the black church is that of being *"a home away from home."* At church, members are accepted for who they are and not for how they physically appear. Thus, a person's body-image is not threatened. By feeling important from such accomplishments as participating in cooking suppers, setting up outings, as well as helping in Sunday school, daycare, or in the church schools, are boost to their self-concept, the *"work product"* part of their self-image, their self-identity, and their reputation. All of these factors in the black church setting support each other in realms of gaining and maintaining a healthy worth-based type of self-esteem.

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